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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE PUSHES FOR DIALOGUE, NEW RELIEF EFFORTS  
IN SUDAN

REF: A. VAT 4461

[1](#)B. 02 VAT 3638

Classified By: Amb. Jim Nicholson for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) Pope John Paul II challenged Sudanese bishops on an official visit to Rome to expand their inter-religious dialogue efforts in the search for peace in Sudan. Vatican officials focused their attention in particular on newly-created Cardinal Wako of Khartoum, pressing him to engage in dialogue. The Pope also proposed the creation of a new inter-religious agency for the coordination of humanitarian aid that could serve to increase cooperation between faiths, in addition to alleviating some of the effects of the civil war. Finally, the Holy See encouraged the bishops to "rekindle efforts" to establish a Catholic university in Sudan. With the elevation of Wako and other moves, the Holy See is signaling its renewed emphasis on Sudan and its hope of attracting world attention to the plight of Sudan's beleaguered people. End Summary.

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Pope Challenges Sudanese Bishops  
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[1](#)2. (C) Pope John Paul II challenged Sudanese bishops December 15, during their quinquennial "ad limina" visit to Rome, to expand their inter-religious dialogue efforts in the search for peace in Sudan. The Pope applauded the reactivation of Sudan's Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue in his official statement, and Vatican officials reportedly reinforced this message in their talks with the bishops. Holy See Sudan Country Director Lucio Sembrano told us December 11 that newly-created Cardinal Gabriel Zubeir Wako of Khartoum was a particular focus of Vatican efforts. Sembrano said that Wako had traditionally shown little faith in such inter-religious ventures, but now had the opportunity to make a difference -- especially given his new status as the first Sudanese Cardinal (ref a).

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But Religious Tensions Will Not Die Easily  
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[1](#)3. (C) Sembrano was unsure of the effect of Vatican lobbying efforts with Wako. The Cardinal has been quoted in the press here as affirming the possibility of peace, but has also emphasized the way in which "religious differences have been used almost as a weapon of war" in the conflict. Our conversations with Sembrano lead us to believe that, like many in the Sudanese Church embittered by dehumanizing treatment of Christians by Islamic fundamentalists (ref b), Wako would be carrying a lot of baggage into inter-religious dialogue. A September interview with Archbishop Paulino Lukudu Loro of Juba, Sudan (published by Rome-based Zenit Catholic news service, which is well read in Vatican circles) offered another example of this mindset. Though Lukudu emphasized the need to "look ahead," he made it clear that it

was necessary to "confront the injustices" of the past. He acknowledged the existence

of some variety of views towards Christianity within the Sudanese Islamic world, but inveighed against the "fanatical Islam" that is "always pushing further south." Sembrano in no way diminished the suffering undergone by Sudanese Christians, but indicated that dialogue and cooperation were the Holy See's preferred way ahead at this point. He said at this juncture, more strident criticism such as that of Bishop Macram Max Gassi, pastor-in-exile of El Obeid and an outspoken critic of the situation in Sudan, may not be productive.

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New Inter-Religious Aid Organization Would  
Present Opportunities  
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14. (SBU) Another piece of the Pope's message was a proposal for the creation of a new inter-religious agency for the coordination of humanitarian aid. Sembrano told us the Holy See felt such an organization would provide an opportunity for trust and collaboration with Muslims and with the Anglican community in Sudan. He said the Holy See welcomed the participation of organizations from all faiths, many of which were in a good position to help, especially in Southern Sudan. Sembrano did not diminish the work of existing aid organizations, but suggested that those who knew the territory would be better equipped to deal with the particular challenges Sudan poses to such work.

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Catholic University in Khartoum?  
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15. (C) Elsewhere in the address, the Pope also encouraged the bishops to "rekindle efforts" to establish a Catholic University in Khartoum. Sembrano emphasized to us the high priority the Holy See places on education as a vehicle for the promotion of mutual understanding and tolerance; he added that the Khartoum government had been supportive of the idea of opening a university. (Note: In the past, Vatican contacts have also touted education as the best defense against Islamic fundamentalism in Sudan and elsewhere (ref b). End note.)

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Financial Accountability  
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16. (C) One challenge in the creation of both the university and new aid organization is that of financial accountability and efficiency. Sembrano (protect) indicated that the Sudanese bishops had, at times in the past, not been good stewards of their financial resources. Any funding of such projects would have to be monitored carefully. The Pope also made this point in his address to the bishops, calling for "equity and transparency...[in] all financial matters...with every effort being made to see that contributions are truly used for the purposes intended."

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Political Climate  
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17. (SBU) Speaking more generally, Sembrano was critical of the Khartoum government, and outlined the struggles of the Catholic Church in Sudan.

Among other offenses, he noted that the Church had not been granted a building permit since the 1960s. Moreover, he said, the government destroys existing churches, claiming that they lie in the path of necessary new roads. Still, overall, Sembrano believed the Sudanese government to be "less hard" in its policies than it had been in the past. He was optimistic that a peace agreement could be worked out before the end of the year. A key to a lasting peace, he said, would be the support of churches and other organizations representative of the Sudanese people. The Catholic Church, he maintained, was a stabilizing force in Sudan. According to Sembrano, the bishops are not pushing for independence for the south, and would respect the choice of the population on Sudan's political future as long as there is freedom of religion for all.

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Humanitarian Situation Grave  
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18. (C) The humanitarian situation, especially in the South, is grave, Sembrano said. Catholic aid agency Caritas is active, but is restricted to certain areas of the country. According to Sembrano, this means that some Sudanese in remote areas ravaged by the civil war are essentially condemned to starvation. Sembrano noted that these injustices are often the result of the actions of local officials rather than of Khartoum. Indoctrinated with a hardline Islamist mindset, they have knee-jerk reactions to those whom they suspect of undermining their authority. Also of great concern to the Holy See are the droves of internally displaced persons who may return home in the wake of a peace agreement to find nothing to sustain them.

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Comment: Vatican Increases Emphasis,  
Sees Challenges Ahead  
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19. (C) Sembrano said the Holy See's creation of Khartoum Archbishop Wako as Cardinal was intended to draw attention to the human rights crisis in Sudan. "The Holy Father wants to let the Sudanese people know that the Holy See has not abandoned them," he told us. According to Sembrano, the Pope also chose this fall to canonize Daniel Comboni, a former missionary in Sudan, in order to emphasize the Vatican's interest in the country.

110. (C) The next step is cooperation -- not just with Muslims, but within the Church. Sembrano (protect) confided to us that Cardinal Wako had not been overly cooperative with the Holy See, failing in the past even to call on the Apostolic Nuncio (the Vatican's Ambassador) to Sudan Dominique Mamberti. Mamberti himself has been preoccupied by the recent death of his mother, but now, according to Sembrano, is ready to reach out to Wako and cooperate to help promote the Holy See's agenda. With his new status as Cardinal and increased support and prodding from the Vatican, Wako may be ready to contribute to inter-religious cooperation in Sudan. Sembrano made a point of praising "all the U.S. is doing" to help bring a lasting peace to the country and would welcome USG efforts to further the initiatives outlined above.

Nicholson

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